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ABSTRACT

The ideal concept of open education would take the form of education permanente, although no present program includes all the features implied by this concept. Up to now the literature on open learning has focused on concern for a learner oriented system. The present focus is on the open learning system itself, with the identification of 10 tentative characteristics of a learning situation that will enable open learning to occur, that will be learner-centered, that will diminish dependencies, and concern itself with learning more than it does with instruction. In order to attain these objectives the system must be capable of eliciting, interpreting, and analyzing learner goals; it should embody two separate but related programs--instructional and learning; participation should be free of traditional academic entry requirements and rewards; learning objectives and evaluation should provide the basis for decision making; the system must be cost effective; all available media should be employed; testing and evaluation should diagnose and analyze the accomplishment of specified learning objectives; independence in learning should be encouraged; the environment must be learner-oriented; and learning must return to being a natural and continuing activity. (BP)

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# Characteristics of Open Learning Systems

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George Bereday recently pointed out*

> "In an industrial society there is simply no avoiding the social significance of educational aspirations....It is not a crime for even the stupid to seek high levels of education, and social customs which reject such aspirations can hardly be repositories of ultimate human wisdom....The lesson for all nations....is that they must move faster and faster into the age of mass education."

The NAEB hardly needs to be reminded of the importance of learner aspirations. The members of this association have been in the forefront in providing dignity and practicality to learner aspiration; but you will be glad to know that you are not alone anymore. Open learning may become one form of the mass education that Bereday is talking about. In discussing some tentative characteristics of open learning systems (one aspect of the Advisory Committee Report) I am not going to repeat previous chapters on societal and learner needs for open learning, on the assumption that this convention is one place where need has been perceived for a long time.

## THE CONCEPT OF OPEN EDUCATION**

The term "open" has been given to so many experimental educational programs, at so many levels, that it is difficult to find a common definition that will describe -- or be acceptable to -- all the different enterprises that use the term. There are "open" schools at the pre-school level, the primary-elementary and secondary level, and in higher and continuing education. However, all the open schools have one principle in common: they are to a greater or lesser extent efforts to expand the freedoms of learners. Some of the open schools are open only in a spatial sense, with learners in school freer to move about in more

*Bereday, George Z., Universities for All, Jossey-Bass, 1973, pp. 141-145.

**Wedemeyer, Charles A., "The Once and Future School", (for Educational Media Council Seminar on Open Learning, Manpower Development and Training Programs; Washington, D.C.; August 21-23, 1973.) "The 'Open' School: Education's Runnymede?" Educational Technology, Vol. 12, No. 1, January, 1972, pp. 65-68.

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individualized work patterns; others provide freedoms in more significant dimensions -- in admissions, in selection of courses, in adaptation of the curriculum to the individual, and freedoms in time as well as spatial aspects (i.e., learners permitted to start, stop, and proceed at their own pace and convenience). Still others approach the ultimate freedoms -- learner goal selection, reaching the learner where he is, in his own environment and situation, on his own terms, and involving him in the evaluation of achievement of the goals that he has selected.

"Open Education" is therefore characterized by a number of features, not all of which are present in each model, nor each of which is exclusive to open education. These features include:

-Opening education to more people -- of all ages -- to enroll in formal and informal programs regardless of where they live, their age, previous experience, schooling, or socio-economic condition; a broadening and spreading of educational opportunity.

-Employing some approach to open admissions (no restricted "places"; credit for previous learning; credit by exam; recognition of life and work experience and independently acquired learning.)

-Employing multiple open channels for communications (learning) via radio, TV, mail and other media in independent study approaches, as well as class and group experiences.

-Making available an open curriculum relevant to the life and learning styles of different people, all of whom carry some degree of responsibility for selecting their own goals, helping in curriculum development, and participating in decision-making regarding their own learning.

-Facilitating open access to learning in homes, libraries, on jobs, in communities as well as in schools; in other words the broadening or opening of the learning environment.

-Encouraging the open participation of part-time learners who combine working with learning.

-Seeking open accreditation between the regular and open schools.

-Arranging open cooperation, resource and staff sharing between the regular and open schools, libraries, public and private schools, business, industry and community resources -- in

program policy
program development
program delivery
program access
and program evaluation

-Regarding as highly relevant the needs, convenience and individually oriented life situations of the learners; programs that are learner oriented.

-Recognizing that life-long learning is an imperative, and seeking to diminish the dependency of learners on "other directed" learning by teaching learners to be to a larger extent responsible for their own learning, and to have confidence in proceeding without the dependency relation that is fostered in conventional schools.

-Regarding as irrelevant the question of whether teachers and learners are always present at the same time and in the same place, because the ultimate learning "environment" is the learner himself, wherever he is, with the open school communicating, supporting, encouraging, serving and guiding.

-Creating new roles for teachers, roles that are closer to the classical Platonic model, with teachers as critic, guide, adviser, mentor, and problem-solver.

-Accepting the learner as a full partner in the processes that link teaching and learning towards mutually selected and accepted goals; the individualization of teaching based on the recognition of the individuality of learning; and the involvement of the learner in the evaluation of progress and achievement.

The ideal concept of open education would take the form of education permanente, open to people at all levels, cradle-to-grave. No single open education program now in existence goes this far.

The Focus of the NAEB Study Advisory Group

The literature on open learning has focused primarily on the societal and learner needs for open learning, and on descriptions or proposals for how these needs can or should be met. In a rather remarkable way, the literature on open learning--at all levels--has been a consistent expression of concern for a learner oriented educational system; even, in many respects, a sometimes redundant but usually fresh and invigorating perception of learning as it ought to be from the point of view of the learner.

The NAEB study advisory group is attempting to go one step farther -- to focus on the characteristics of the open learning system itself which can bring open learning into existence for learners wherever they are.

Characteristics of Open Learning Systems

We have asked ourselves what must characterize a system that will enable open learning to occur; that will be learner-centered; that will diminish dependencies;

that will concern itself with learning more than it does with instruction, in congruence with the concept of open learning.

We have tentatively identified a number of system characteristics.

1. The system must be capable of eliciting, interpreting and analyzing learner goals at the entry point and throughout the student's contact with the instructional and learning program.

2. The system must acknowledge that it embodies two separate but related programs -- the instructional program carried on by the system, and reflecting the needs and aspirations of learners working towards mutually agreed upon goals; and the learning program carried on by learners with the assistance of the system.

3. The system must be capable of enabling learners to participate in the program of learning and instruction without imposing traditional academic entry requirements, without the pursuit of an academic degree or other certification as the exclusive reward.

4. The system must require formulation of learning objectives in such a way that they can serve as the basis for decisions in instructional design, including evaluation, and in such a way that they will not only be fully known to the students, but so that students can participate in decision-making.

5. As an operating principle, the system must be capable, after reaching a critical minimum of aggregation, of accommodating increased numbers of learners without a commensurate increase in the unit cost of the basic learning experiences: i.e., costs must not be directly and rigidly volume sensitive. After reaching the necessary level of aggregation, unit costs should show a diminishing relationship to total systems costs.

6. The system should make it operationally possible for the methodologies of instruction and learning to employ sound, television, film, and print as options for mediating learning experiences.

7. The system should use testing and evaluation principally to diagnose and analyze the accomplishment of specified learning objectives, including the objective of self-directed rather than other-directed learning.

8. The system must be able to tolerate distance between the instructional staff resources, and the learner, and employ the distance factor as a positive element in the development of independence in learning.

9. The system must accept the learner and his surround as the environment for learning, and must concentrate on enriching that environment instead of concentrating solely on developing specialized teaching environments which intrude barriers of place, space, time and other-direction in learning.

10. The system must seek, obtain and maintain the active cooperation of community and regional resources which can be a factor in enriching the learning environment, in diminishing learner dependence on a single resource, and in returning learning as a natural and continuing activity to the living space, the indigenous learning environment which includes living, working, recreating and learning....as an essential step towards the "learning society".

These are presently only tentative systems characteristics. Some will remain; some will go or be modified or combined with others; and new ones may be formulated.

Your thoughtful consideration of the systems characteristics suggested will help the Study Advisory Group to make its work more useful.

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